

# Grand Prix construction to start by end of July

By Timothy B. Wheeler

Organizers of the Grand Prix of Baltimore say they plan to start construction on the downtown auto race circuit by the end of July and finish just in time for the three-day Labor Day weekend event.

Tony Cotman of NZR Consulting, the company in charge of building the race circuit, said preparing the 12-turn course around the Inner Harbor should take about 32 days.

“The majority of it will be done in the final 22 days,” Cotman said in a statement released Friday. In the final week, he noted, streets will be closed around the circuit so crews can work through the night.

Cotman said race organizers would strive to minimize disruption for downtown businesses, workers, residents and visitors.

“It’s an extremely difficult build because of the sheer size of the area,” he said. Besides installing cement barriers and safety fencing along the streets to be used in the race, crews will be erecting grandstands and other structures for the race teams, media covering the races and the thousands of spectators expected.

Last year’s Grand Prix drew an estimated 100,000 spectators and earned favorable reviews from race crews, though it proved to be a financial disaster for the original organizers, Baltimore Racing Development, which collapsed, leaving millions in unpaid bills. After one replacement fell through, Mayor Stephanie

Rawlings-Blake’s administration struck a deal to stage this year’s race with Race On LLC, a team led by two local investors. It has partnered with racing champion Michael Andretti’s sports marketing firm to promote the event.

“Street circuits have a lot of challenges, but it’s just a matter of a good construction schedule,” said Cotman, who has designed and built courses elsewhere. He said organizers intend to work “hand-in-hand” with city officials and agencies.

“I think both sides learned a lot from last year,” Cotman said, “and I think now the city has more of an understanding of the requirements and how it affects them.”

Race organizers say they will schedule their work around a string of 17 Baltimore Orioles home games at Camden Yards in the weeks leading up to Labor Day. There are seven straight home games to be played up until the day before the start of the Grand Prix.

With the southern part of the 2-mile circuit planned to loop around Oriole Park, Cotman said night construction work will be delayed until after those games.

Race organizers also say they plan to “tweak” the track design this year to speed up the race and improve views by spectators and those watching the televised event.

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